

THE CALAMITIES OF SURGERY

LAST Friday a patient died under the influence of chloroform. It was given with all customary care, and there is nothing in all the circumstances to which we can refer that would imply that any thing was left undone that ought to have been done, or anything done that should not have been done. In the morning I had advised the chloroform for this patient, whose hand had to be put straight in order to avert the deformity that was being occasioned by disease of the wrist-joint. In the afternoon my house surgeon and a dresser were giving it, the pulse suddenly failed, and the patient sank and died. The friends would not allow a post-mortem examination, so the case affords us no useful information. But the fact that I want you to keep in mind is that notwithstanding all care, and all good intention, surgery shortened to a few minutes this woman's life that might have lasted many years. At the very worst she would have gone about for the remainder of her life with a crippled hand; but she might have lived to a good old age. She died; and died without any warning of her danger.

This is one of the calamities of surgery. It is one of the many cases that lead one to wish that something might be discovered or invented which should combine what, I believe, was the greater safety of sulphuric ether, the first and original anaesthetic, with what is the far greater convenience and facility of administration of chloroform. But till that substance is discovered we shall have to proceed in surgery with uncertainty; or rather with the certainty, that occasionally, we cannot tell when, some one whose life we are trying to prolong or ease will die, and die by the means that we use to save him from pain.

Paget, Sir James: *Clinical Lectures and Essays*. London, Longmans, Green, 1875, pp. 51-52.